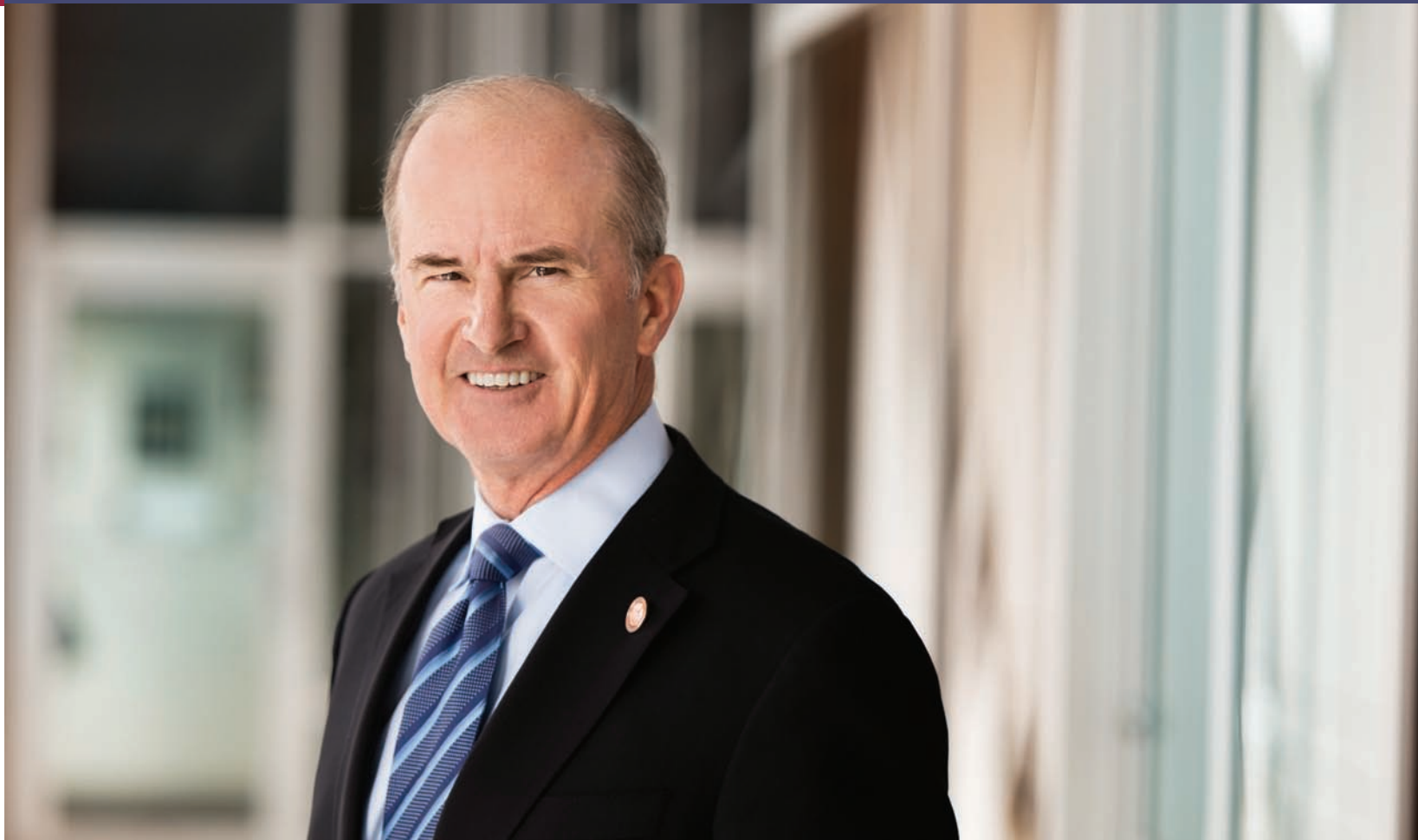


# DISTINGUISHED GRADUATE GENERAL KEVIN P. CHILTON | CLASS OF 1976



Photographed by Lewis Carlyle

## The Early Days

General Kevin P. Chilton, Class of 1976, grew up dreaming of becoming an airline pilot. A chance meeting with an Academy cadet introduced him to what he thought was a path to realizing that dream. Instead, it was the beginning of a lifelong love affair with the U.S. Air Force that completely changed his life. Raised by parents who valued honesty, hard work, faith and service, he fit well into cadet life, serving as both a Squadron and Group Honor Representative.

“My fondest memories of the Academy are all associated with my classmates,” says Gen. Chilton while reflecting on the strong ties between fellow cadets. “You learn that to be successful as an organization you have to work as a team. It’s very important to build bonds with people and I felt very close with my classmates.”

A life long dream to take a seat in the cockpit came true at the Academy during his third-degree year. “The soaring program was a very fun time for me,” Gen. Chilton explains. “I loved going down to the airfield and being a part of that. One rather funny experience happened when I was up by myself in a single-seat sail plane. I’d been riding thermals all morning, made it all the way up to 16,000 feet and was still going up! I ended up flying over downtown Colorado Springs—looking down on Pikes Peak is a memory I will never forget. The tower eventually had to call me back down so I could catch the bus and get back for lunch.”

Like many graduates, Gen. Chilton remembers the difficulties of such a demanding school and how it would go on to influence his career in later years. “The challenges I faced in school are

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Gen. Kevin Chilton '76 met his wife, now-Maj. Gen. Cathy Chilton, during test pilot training at Edwards Air Force Base in California. Today the couple has four children.

no different than those of any other cadet at the Academy,” Gen. Chilton says. “The physical and mental challenges of your doolie year, along with the time crunch we all faced helped shape me as leader going forward. I can remember running into a very difficult day in pilot training—after reflecting on that day, I remember thinking, this isn’t so bad. Having finished four years at the Academy, I determined that it’s going to be pretty hard for me to have a bad day in the United States Air Force.”

A distinguished graduate, he received a Guggenheim Fellowship and earned a master’s degree in Engineering from Columbia University. Graduating first in pilot training, he flew operational assignments in the RF-4 and F-15. Selected as the top graduate from Squadron Officer School in 1982, he was awarded the Secretary of the Air Force Leadership Award. In 1984, he graduated first in his class from Air Force Test Pilot School and, following a tour as a test pilot and Squadron Operations Officer, was selected to be a NASA astronaut.

## Zero Gravity

“The Air Force Academy’s influence on my career is rather interesting,” Gen. Chilton Says. “I came in as a blank sheet with regard to the military, and I quickly fell in love with engineering, which eventually lead me down a very eclectic career path. I was also lucky enough to get involved with the soaring program. As it turns out, flying aircraft with no engines came in very handy later down the road during my time at NASA.”

General Chilton was the pilot on two shuttle missions, including the maiden flight of the Space Shuttle Endeavour, and was the Commander on his third trip into space.

“NASA was a true evolution for me,” he explains. “In 1961, I remember my parents waking me and my sister up at 3am to watch Alan Shepard make America’s first flight into space. ‘One day you’ll thank us for this,’ my dad said. The best part about NASA for me was the people. All throughout the Johnson and Kennedy Space Centers, these are the people who put us on the moon in less than one decade from a cold start. A lot of those people were still working for NASA when I arrived, and

they were every bit as dedicated as the people I had worked with in the military.”

General Chilton describes his time spent in the space shuttle program as an unforgettable experience. “Certainly the most unique part of the whole experience was having the opportunity so leave the planet three times,” he says. “The space shuttle was a tremendous system to fly. My favorite parts about space travel were a combination of weightlessness and the view out the window. I think every pilot has dreams of flying without the help of an airplane. You certainly do that 24/7 when you’re in space. You don’t climb down the ladder to the mid deck, you fly down like Superman. The liberating feeling of being able to fly was simply fantastic. Furthermore, words cannot capture the beauty of the earth when you’re looking down from that altitude. I took every moment I had to look out the window. That was precious.”

### The Next Frontier

Chilton later served as the Deputy Program Manager for the International Space Station Program. After 11 years in NASA, he returned to the Air Force with assignments as the Deputy Director of Operations for Air Force Space Command; Commander of the 9th Reconnaissance Wing; Deputy Director, Political Military Affairs, Joint Staff J-5; Director of Air Force Programs and acting Assistant Vice Chief of Staff. He also commanded 8th Air Force; Joint Functional Component Command for Space and Global Strike; Task Force 204; Air Force Space Command; and U.S. Strategic Command.

The first astronaut to achieve four-star rank, General Chilton retired from active duty after 34 1/2 years of service. “I’ve always been a little uncomfortable when people thank me for my service,” he admits shyly, “because frankly, I had a ball. I loved what I was doing, I believed in what I was doing. The people who truly served were my family. I met my wife in pilot training and she continues to serve today as a reservist. She stood on the launch control tower at NASA three different times with our young children, watching her husband sit on top of three million pounds of high explosives.”

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General Chilton continues to use his exceptional leadership skills and expertise as a mentor to new generals and admirals at the National Defense University; and scientists and engineers in the Defense Science Studies Group. He is an advisor to leadership at three National Labs and serves on the Board of Governors for the Lawrence Livermore Lab.

“My family are my heroes,” Gen. Chilton concludes of his storied career. “I’ve always thought that it’s very important during a career in the military to recognize and appreciate how much your family enables you to get up every morning and go support our great nation.”

As a member of the Boards of the Association of Graduates and the Falcon Foundation, Gen. Chilton is passionate about giving back to the Academy as a frequent speaker for cadet academic, leadership, and honor classes, as well as for various graduation and class events. In every endeavor General Chilton has undertaken, both on active duty and in civilian life, he has exemplified the traits that Academy graduates strive to achieve: integrity, service and excellence. ✓